

“Upward Journey, pt 2: Quieting the Mind”

Luke 10; Philippians 4

June 16, 2019

You know, Mary really **should have** gotten up to help Martha.

In fact, Mary really **shouldn't** have been sitting at Jesus' feet to begin with. In their world, that's the posture a disciple takes to his rabbi, and that was a role typically reserved for men. She **shouldn't** have been doing that.

But beside all that, there really were some things she **should** have been doing.

She **should** have been practicing better hospitality. In their culture, when someone comes to visit, you'd better feed them, or offer them a drink. The one thing you didn't do is just sit there... without offering them anything. That would be a clear sign that they are not welcome in your home. It would suggest they were somehow beneath you, less than.

So, if Jesus comes to your small little home, you're **not** going to sit there...

unless you have a servant

who is getting things together for you and serves you both.

But Mary... just sits there... when there was so much she **should** be doing.

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When I was in seminary I was fortunate to spend a few weeks in Morocco exploring what Christianity looks like in a Muslim context. And in Morocco, they still practice hospitality like this. If you go into anyone's home, you will always, without fail, be served a shot-glass-sized-cup of hot mint tea that's so sweet it'll start rotting your teeth by the time you've finished it.

In fact, if you go to the market and walk into someone's shop to look at fabric or look at a rug... the first thing you have to do is sit down with the shop owner and drink a cup of hot, sweet, mint tea. Then you could get down to the business of exploring his rugs...

Everywhere you went, this kind of hospitality was required.

And I remember one day we took this dirt road for hours up into these hills where there were remote villages... with homes made of adobe. It was like I had taken a trip right back into ancient Palestine... and I was sitting in a home that could have been Mary and Martha's home.

And of course... it didn't matter if we had other plans for the day... we were going to sit there and wait while the mint leaves were gathered, and put in the kettle, and the fire started, and the tea boiled... and the sugar added... and the tea poured into these little cups, each one then placed on a beautiful tray.

And while we were drinking that, a goat was slaughtered, and the meat boiled, and sauce made, and couscous cooked...

You see... there was just so much to do... when you have guests.

Of course, it made us feel bad. In our culture we hate to think we're putting someone out or taking up their time. But the expectations in this kind of culture are really so different from our own. The

worst thing we could have done was to refuse their hospitality. It would have been a profound insult. So, we sat there... while they went through all this work....

They might poke their heads in and out of the room for moments... but they were so busy at work. There was just so much to do....

***And Mary... is just sitting there!... Letting Martha do it all on her own.  
Can you believe it?!***

I can just imagine the thoughts going through Martha's head at 100 mph. Martha's having one of those internal conversations that we all have at times.

"What the bleepidy-bleep does Mary think she's doing?! Can she see how much we still have to do? Why am I always the one doing everything!"

In fact, all Martha can even think about is all there is to do. And who is doing what, and what else they need to be thinking about next.

She's worried about getting the tea made,  
and she's worried about making sure Jesus is appropriately honored,  
and she's thinking about Mary... sitting there like only men are supposed to do,  
and she's obsessing about what Mary *isn't doing*...  
And her mind is racing, racing, racing in circles... tugging her over here,  
and back over there,  
always criticizing, and judging,  
and obsessing about what isn't getting done,  
and worried about what will happen if she says something,  
and thinking about what will happen if she doesn't say something.

**In other words, Martha's mind is chasing after every single thought that pops up in her head, and it's pulling her all over the place.**

She's worked up in a frenzy of thoughts,  
and comes back into the small room, and sees Mary just sitting there  
doing nothing,  
and she loses it. **"Jesus! Tell her to help me!"**

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**You know, a lot has been made of this story... and the contrast between Mary and Martha. You've probably heard a sermon or two about it along the way... in which Martha becomes a symbol of the active life... the life of service. And Mary is a symbol of the contemplative life... the life of prayer and reflection.**

And so, when Jesus tells Martha that Mary has "chosen the better way, and It won't be taken from her" it starts to suggest to us that serving others just isn't as important as resting at the feet of Jesus... in prayerful adoration.

Only, I don't think that's what's going on in this story... especially since Luke has put this story right here at this point in the gospel he's writing.

Remember, the gospel writers are thoughtful, and intentional, and so artful in how they put the story together. So, it's always helpful to pay attention to where the story comes in the flow of the gospel story....

And wouldn't you know it, this story comes right after **that famous parable of the Good Samaritan**.... which kind of has the opposite message of how we've interpreted the Mary and Martha story, doesn't it?

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the Priest and the Levite don't have time to help the bleeding man on the road. They are too busy heading off to their religious duties of prayer and worship.

Instead, a Samaritan, that unholy other, stops and helps. And at the very end of the parable, what does Jesus say? It's the verse right before this story of Mary and Martha. Jesus says, **"Go and do likewise." Go and do! ... Which is exactly what Martha seems to be up to, right?**

She's going and doing, going and doing... and if you look closely, Jesus doesn't criticize all that. What Jesus points out is the spirit in which Martha is going and doing.

The critical point that Jesus makes.... is not that Martha is serving. It is the anxious, worried, distracted, judging mind that is **controlling the way she is serving and doing.**

Jesus doesn't say, "Martha, Martha, you're just doing too much. Just relax." What Jesus actually says here in verse 41 is, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by so many things; there is need of only one thing."

You see, Martha and Mary aren't images of  
the active life versus the prayerful life.  
They are images of  
the distracted and worried mind versus the centered, quiet,  
and opened mind.

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**The difference between the two profoundly affect us all... in all the spheres of our lives ---  
whether at home, or at work,  
or at church, or at school,  
or in the car, or off volunteering somewhere.**

The difference between the  
worried and anxious mind  
versus the centered and quiet mind  
determines the spirit in which we move through these spheres of our lives.

Which is why... the upward path of our minds... in becoming like Christ... is about more than the study... that we talked about last week. It is **also** about quieting the noise of the mind... about training that anxious, worried, distracted, Martha-like stream of thoughts we all have...

to slow down... and quiet down... so that it can be open and aware of the divine presence of Christ... sitting right there in our homes with us.

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You may not have noticed this yet, so I want to point it out, because we are getting close to the end. This has actually been the pattern with all three of the paths we've been exploring around spiritual formation.

The body, the heart, and the mind... all need to be engaged fully in coming to know and love God. None of them can be neglected.

But at the same time, each of them can become compulsively over functioning. In fact, there is probably one that is naturally compulsive and over functioning for you.

For the body, it needs to be engaged and awakened through our senses, and instincts, and actions... but it becomes compulsive and over functioning when we use the power of our body to control others,

or to always keep busy...

or if it needs stimulation all the time... with more and more.

In the same way, the heart needs to be awakened to love and connection with others, and our deep truest self, and connection with God. But the heart can become over-reactive when our emotions are pulling us here and there all the time, leaning into our relationships, and then pulling away,

getting easily offended and hurt,

too obsessed with our own unique identity...

**So, the heart has to be engaged, but it also has to be freed and liberated to not be controlled.**

And the same is true with the mind. The mind needs to be engaged and growing, learning and imagining, as we talked about last week.

But there is another side to the life of the mind... with its insistent stream of thoughts always clamoring for our attention...

offering us something else to worry about,

something else to focus on,

something else to pull our attention away from the present moment.

**The mind has to become *unhooked* from all that... so that it can be free and open to the present moment...**

**free and open to one another...**

**free and open to the mysterious presence of God that is here in this moment.**

Which is exactly what Martha was missing, wasn't it? Not only was she not present and open to Jesus or to Mary... she wasn't even present to her work. She was so hooked by her constant stream of thoughts, and criticisms, and judgments, and that internal dialogue we all have, that she couldn't even be present to the gift of her work.

And this is what Jesus is trying to interrupt. "You are worried and distracted by so many things..." he says.

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She's not the only one, is she?

Our minds... with their constant chatterbox of thoughts, and worries, and comparisons, and questions, and judgement... are always clamoring to know more

so that it can stay in control, and stay safe, and anticipate, and plan ahead...

***And the more all that drives us, and controls us, the more fear and anxiety grow in us. We will continue to live cut off from the gifts of our lives that are right here, right now.***

Iris Murdoch, a British moral philosopher describes it this way. “Our minds are continually active, fabricating an anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying veil which partially conceals the world.”<sup>1</sup>

It conceals what is true. It conceals all the gifts, and joy, and beauty, and (maybe most important for the mind) it conceals the deep truths of the moment... that it actually longs to know.

And so, sitting in an ancient jail cell toward the end of his life, unsure of what will happen next to him, the apostle Paul writes to a church in Philippi, “Rejoice in the Lord. The Lord is near. So stop worrying. Instead, by prayer and thanksgiving... out of gratitude, offer your request...

And the peace of God... a peace which surpasses understanding,  
a peace that transcends all the logic and thoughts and comparisons and worry and judgments...

a peace that surpasses understanding,  
will guard both your hearts and your minds  
in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:4-7)

What Paul is inviting us to has sometimes been described by some as the “quiet mind.” Not an empty mind, but a quiet mind.

The quiet mind still has thoughts running through it, it’s just less attached to those thoughts. It’s a mind with a kind of spacious quality, open and present.

You see, your mind’s ability to know and love God is not ultimately measured by the amount of knowledge you possess. Yes, as I said last week, ideas matter, and study is essential. I hope you are engaging your mind. But the mind’s ability to know and love God is not simply measured by the number of degrees you have or books you’ve read.

***Ultimately, it is measured by its ability to both receive and discern new insights... which requires an openness to the present moment.***

And it’s this kind of centered presence that we see embodied in Mary... sitting there at the feet of Jesus. She was being present to the moment.

Now, that doesn’t mean Mary shouldn’t help Martha. I still think she should. And it doesn’t mean we shouldn’t get about doing what needs to be done in our world.

But it does mean our minds are present to the “one thing needed,” as Jesus puts it. That is, our minds are free and awake to the sacredness of the present moment.

**The “one thing needed” ...is surely an awareness of the presence of God right here,  
right now,  
with us,  
in this moment, in this place.**

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Alister McGrath, *The Passionate Intellect: Christian Faith and the Discipleship of the Mind* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2010), 45–46.

And isn't that what the mind so often misses... with its constant stream of thoughts, and opinions, and inner dialogue, and distraction, and worries about the future and planning and figuring out?

That's how we live most of the time.

And we are missing the very presence of God, right here, right now, with us, in this present moment,

Right here, right now... as we're changing that dirty diaper,  
and trying to help our kids decide what college to attend.

Right here, right now... as we're paying our bills, and asking questions about our finances.

**Right here, right now... as we're trying to figure out what we believe, and what the answer is on our math test.**

**The presence of God is right here, right now... as we're working out  
who we want to be when we grow up,  
and who we are inside our high school walls...  
and who we are now that we are retired.**

The presence of God is right here, right now, in this present moment. But it's only the quiet mind that is aware of it.

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So, I want to give you a couple practices again this week to help the mind be free, and liberated, and unhooked for all the thoughts... that are always there.

Remember, we're not talking about emptying the mind. The stream of thoughts will always be there. We're talking about quieting them down.

### 1. Centering Prayer

The first practice is called Centering Prayer. In many ways, I think of Centering Prayer as the hardest kind of prayer... and the simplest kind of prayer.

All you do is pick a sacred word like "love" or "grace" or "Christ."

Then, set a timer for 20 minutes and close your eyes... with the intention of being present to God... the one thing needed.

**To do that, to be present, you say your sacred word, you let go of your attachments to your thoughts....**

Thomas Keating describes our thoughts as like little boats on the river of our consciousness. The boats will always keep coming. But the idea is to let them float on down the river, rather than hopping on board and letting them carry you off.

**Again, I want to be really clear: the goal is not to empty your mind. There is nothing to achieve in this prayer... which is why it's so simple.**

All there is, is your **intention** to be present to God.

And so... as soon as you realize you're riding along on another one of those thoughts...  
you repeat your sacred word  
and return to your intention to be present to God.

That return might happen 1,000 times in your 20 minutes. But with each return you're practicing letting go of another thought that wants to drive you and returning to Christ.

If you want to learn this practice, I'd encourage you to pick up Cynthia Bourgeault's book, Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening.

But all of us can try it once this week.

## 2. Wonder

**The second practice is the practice of wonder.**

**Now, we don't often think of wonder as something we practice, do we? Most of the time, it just comes to us unbidden...But we actually can create the space for wonder by bringing a simple, open curiosity to the moment.**

Richard Rohr suggests we can cultivate wonder by holding the questions of our lives... the questions that our minds want to chase answers for... with a kind of grace-filled curiosity, rather than a compulsion to find answers. He describes this as three kinds of standing... which is think is a good verb. Because our minds are so often chasing, rather than standing, aren't they? So, he suggests:

standing in the disbelief,  
standing in the question itself,  
standing in awe before something.

And together... standing in the disbelief, in the question, in the awe... they cultivate wonder... a wonder that quiets the mind and opens us to the holy presence of God, it opens us up to the peace that surpasses understanding.

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So, those are the practices for this week: Centering Prayer and cultivating wonder. Again, they aren't the only practices...

**But together they sure will help our Martha driven minds quiet down and take another step in the upward path...**

**in which our minds become present to the one thing,  
the One God...  
whose grace and love is with us, right here, right now.**

Amen.

Silent Reflection:

"Wisdom, discernment, and thoughtfulness all require the mind to be quiet but engaged, questioning but trusting, curious but rooted."

Chris Fillingham, *Soul Journey*, dissertation.

Song of Response:

Draw Me.

"Come and Find a Quiet Center."